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ABSTRACT

The welfare system is presently being reformed and restructured to emphasize employment. However, while pushing remedial education and job placement for adults, we may be losing a whole generation of children whose failure in school dooms them to repeat the dependency cycle. An alarming number of youngsters are poor, have a chaotic family life, and face situations putting them at risk of long-term disadvantage and a bleak future. Although education has traditionally offered an escape hatch from poverty and disadvantage, the present system is inadequate to help such children. Many youth are dropping out; others are leaving school without basic job-holding skills. The National Association of State Boards of Education (NASBE) is undertaking a multifaceted effort, called Joining Forces, to develop joint strategies for successfully serving high risk youngsters and to promote these strategies' adoption by education and social welfare systems throughout the United States to help children break or avoid the welfare cycle, Joining Forces seeks to help (1) disadvantaged and high risk families better support their children's educational performance; and (2) schools improve these children's academic performance and likelihood of graduating from high school. Joining Forces will help schools and human services agencies with early intervention, family-school involvement programs, early response to children experiencing problems, and necessary policy changes. By working together or in tandem, the education and social welfare systems can make better use of limited resources and give each system and the children a better chance of success. (MLH)

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JOINING FORCES:

LINKING THE EDUCATION AND SOCIAL WELFARE SYSTEMS TO HELP AT-RISK CHILDREN AND YOUTH

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JOINING FORCES:
Linking the Education and Social Welfare Systems
to Help At-Risk Children and Youth

The Problem

Welfare reform is the issue of the day. To a great extent, this emanates from a concern about at-risk children and the looming possibility of multigenerational dependency. Political leaders and welfare administrators are redefining the mission of the welfare system, and are restructuring programs to emphasize employment. Yet while we are pushing remedial education and job placement for adults, we are losing a generation of children whose failure in school can only doom them to repeat the cycle of dependency.

An alarming number of children and youth today face situations which threaten their immediate well-being and put them "at-risk" of long-term disadvantage and a bleak future. One in four children, over 13 million, are born in poverty; almost 6 million of these live in households with incomes less than half the poverty level. In 1983, there were about 500,000 births to teens. Babies of teen mothers are likely to be of low birth-weight and suffer from birth defects, developmental delays and learning difficulties. The young mothers -- still children themselves -- are likely to leave school and depend on public assistance; over half the mothers now on welfare had their first child as a teen. Fifty-nine percent of children born in 1983 will at some point live with only one parent, in households prone to poverty and stress. Minority children are at particular risk for all these factors.

In many of these households, family life is chaotic. Parents have difficulty carrying out their parental responsibilities, key among which is helping their children succeed in school. Indeed, the parents themselves may have had unsuccessful school experiences or dropped out of school. They are often functional illiterates.

The Importance of Education

Traditionally, education has been viewed as the means of escape from poverty and disadvantage. Yet today, this means of escape is often illusive. One out of every four children entering ninth grade will not graduate from high school; the drop-out rate is considerably higher among minorities and the poor, and in some cities approaches 50 percent. Children who come into the classroom with serious disadvantages and impediments can be expected to have trouble learning, and may well leave school without even the basic skills needed to hold a job.

For many of these children, the achievement standards being adopted as part of education reform will be an added barrier. Without remedial efforts to help those who do not meet the standards, restoration of excellence in the schools could be a hollow victory, leaving behind hundreds of thousands of children.

As a society, we cannot afford from either an ethical or economic perspective to ignore these children. A critical challenge facing all of us is how to help the at-risk child perform and achieve in school. And this already enormous challenge will grow as the proportion of schoolchildren at-risk grows.

Joining Forces

The National Association of State Boards of Education (NASBE) believes that a challenge of this scale and scope can only be met through the combined efforts of our major people-serving systems. NASBE therefore is undertaking a multi-faceted effort, called **Joining Forces**, to develop joint strategies for successfully serving at-risk youngsters and to promote the adoption of these strategies by education and social welfare systems throughout the country.

To the extent that personal, family and environmental problems are minimized or resolved, children will be better able to learn; to the extent that children learn, they will be better able to support themselves and avoid long-term dependency. Breaking or avoiding the "welfare cycle" means assuring that the children now at-risk have the ability to support themselves and their families in the future.

To reach this goal, **Joining Forces** seeks to:

- help disadvantaged and high-risk families better support their children's educational performance, and
- help schools improve the academic performance of children from these families, thereby increasing the likelihood that they will stay in school and graduate.

What Joining Forces Will Do

Joining Forces seeks to be the catalyst for tangible change in policy and practice, adopted at all levels of the education and social welfare systems. Examples of the types of change which **Joining Forces** will encourage and help schools and human service agencies implement include:

Early Intervention to Prevent Future Problems

- Using welfare rolls to identify families with young children, so that they can be targeted for early education program recruitment; these families are often isolated, ineffective at accessing community resources, and unaware of children's developmental needs, and without special outreach, schools might fail to enroll the highest risk children
- Offering parent education classes to parents of children enrolled in early education programs, and either mandating attendance by welfare parents or providing inducements to participation, such as extra money with which to purchase educational toys for the children
- Showing a video on child development and good parenting in welfare office waiting rooms
- As welfare requires adolescent parents to stay in school and other parents to take jobs outside the home, expanding school-based day care with a child development focus and after-school programs for "latch-key children," where the children can get homework help and have constructive social and recreational experiences

Strengthening Family Involvement in Schools and Academic Achievement

- Specifying in a "contract" between the welfare recipient and the agency, in which each makes a commitment to activities that will promote family self-sufficiency, that the parent join the PTA (with dues paid by the welfare agency), meet regularly with the child's teacher, provide a quiet time and place for the child to study, and take the child to the library weekly

- Assuring that teachers are available for conferences with parents who work, especially those formerly on welfare and just recently employed, whose lack of tenure or hourly wage structure may not allow them to take time off from their jobs

- Capitalizing on the fact that welfare recipients read or have read to them anything included with welfare checks, enclosing with checks positive messages about the importance of school and ways to help children achieve academically; for example, in report card months, an insert could remind parents to look at their child's progress and provide a number to call if the children need additional help

- Developing assignments in the schools for parents who must fulfill a work requirement to qualify for welfare

Responding Early to Children Experiencing Problems

- Developing compatible automated data systems that allow school-welfare department "matches" to identify truant children who are in welfare families, and adopting referral and follow-up procedures so that welfare system social workers address the problem with the parents and children

- Providing in-service training to teachers so that they can more readily recognize children who may be abused or who are experiencing problems outside the classroom; and having a social welfare worker housed at the school site or available one afternoon per week in the teachers' lounge, so that teachers can easily explore concerns they have about children and make referrals, if indicated

- Providing summer jobs for teachers in community and welfare agencies, so that they become familiar with the resources to which families can be referred and the home circumstances of children like those they teach

Changing Policies To Support Children and School Success

- As welfare agencies adopt policies that encourage or require truant children to return to school in order for the family to receive assistance, assuring that local school policies do not conflict and offering special programs to make the return a positive and productive experience

- Under federal regulations, a child becomes ineligible for welfare at 18, unless he is a full-time student who will complete his course of study before his 19th birthday; at 19, he is ineligible irrespective of school status. As schools toughen standards, increase graduation requirements, end "social promotions," and begin to accept responsibility for children up to age 21, the school careers of at-risk youngsters may be extended. Change would be sought in welfare policies, so that they support the objective of keeping youth in school, not be a factor adding "push-outs" to the high number of dropouts.

The Approach

Joining Forces supports the goals that the education and social welfare systems are setting for themselves and those they serve. By working together or in tandem, the education and social welfare systems stand to make better use of limited resources and to give each system, and the children, a greater chance at success.

Fiscal pressures, differences in professional orientation, training, and vocabulary, categorical programs, and complex administrative structures all work against collaboration. **Joining Forces**, with an independent staff knowledgeable about each system, will serve as a bridge to help overcome these barriers.

To achieve change on as broad a scale as possible as quickly as possible, **Joining Forces** will both foster an environment conducive to and supportive of cooperation, and will provide assistance with implementation of new efforts. The initiative will:

- Provide a forum so that the creativity being applied to reform of the separate systems can be focused as well on joint thought and action

  Three times over a period of approximately three to four years, a select group of top administrators and experts in education and social welfare will be convened to define common objectives, develop ideas that can advance the state-of-the-art, and obtain top-level commitment to joint action. Initially, through a structured opportunity to interact and discuss the issues, these individuals will help identify promising areas for cooperation and strategies for joint action. As the initiative proceeds, the administrators' conference will provide a forum for evaluation of results and for discussion of ways to expand and institutionalize successful approaches.

- Identify and publicize successful models of joint action

  Information on successful joint approaches is hard to come by because they are generally localized and small-scale, and because no entity exists with the mandate to consider and promote joint action. Information on successful models of joint action will be gathered through a literature search, site visits, and a questionnaire sent to state and local education and welfare agencies. Results will be published, and will become part of a

resource bank that can be consulted by agencies or individuals interested in undertaking joint efforts.

In addition, a periodic newsletter and articles will highlight activity around the country, report on relevant policy and legislative changes, and stimulate discussion of issues.

- Develop and implement innovative strategies for joint action

  Major emphasis will be placed on direct work with states and localities to help define the strategies they would like to undertake and assist in the implementation of change. The nature and level of support from **Joining Forces** will vary with the needs, design and scope of individual efforts.

- Promote collaboration among national reform efforts

  Joining Forces will build on rather than duplicate the efforts of the individual systems to implement improvements within their own arenas. Recent welfare and education reform proposals have expressed the need for linkage between the two systems, but have contained few if any specific ideas as to how to do this. **Joining Forces** staff will work with those responsible for the next stage of reform to explore and encourage joint strategies.

Participants

NASBE is the membership organization for state boards of education, which are the policymaking bodies established by state governments to oversee elementary and secondary education.

NASBE will provide leadership in bringing together organizations, institutions, and individuals who can contribute to and implement improvements in serving at-risk youngsters. In addition to state and local officials, **Joining Forces** will involve key national groups such as the National Governors' Association, the American Public Welfare Association, the Council of Chief State School Officers, and the National Alliance of Business. Parent groups and professional organizations will also participate.

The Project Director is Janet Levy. Ms. Levy was formerly a senior state administrator who has worked with policy and management aspects of the social welfare system since 1973. On a volunteer basis, she has tutored children in urban public school systems for over twenty years.